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POLICY ISSUES

Policy statement by the Executive Director

Addendum

STATEMENT BY THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR AT THE OPENING OF THE HIGH-LEVEL PLENARY SEGMENT OF THE EIGHTEENTH SESSION OF THE GOVERNING COUNCIL, 22 MAY 1995

1. Mr. President, Excellencies, distinguished delegates and colleagues. Good morning! As we reconvene this week it is with a renewed sense of optimism and a revitalization of energy to finish the task we have started. Each of us gathered here today shares a responsibility - a responsibility to make the relationship between people and the planet on which we live more harmonious. We all aspire to greater security, to peace, to a decent quality of life for all the world's people, and we know it cannot be achieved and sustained unless it is pursued within the natural capacity of planet Earth.

2. Our work is very closely bound up with the spectrum of human activities that impinge upon, and are, in turn, shaped by, the quality of the environment. Our work, to be meaningful, must encompass that range of causes and effects. In short, our work must relate to real life. But real life is complex. Our temptation has been to simplify our universe, to develop distinct and specialized disciplines, each examining a different slice of the world and the human condition through its own lens. Each firmly in the belief that it alone would reveal the answers to the riddles of our human existence. And we have undoubtedly learned a great deal about the parts of our world as a result. But our greatest mistakes have been made when we have been seduced into believing that our simplified understanding equipped us to manage the world in all its complexity. The value of mistakes is in the lessons we learn from them. What we are learning is that knowledge of the parts does not equal wisdom sufficient to manage the whole. As we begin to understand our world in as holistic a manner as possible, it is with growing humility about our human capabilities.

3. Two decades ago, protecting the environment meant preserving an animal species, or controlling a polluting industry - activities pursued almost in isolation from the multitude of causes and effects with which these issues were entwined. The proven inadequacy of this approach has given rise to a natural evolution over the years to the concept of sustainable development - a recognition that meaningful progress on any so-called environmental issue must take into account a myriad of other factors in the socio-economic mosaic.

4. Over the years, this organization, like many others, developed by accumulating a series of distinct and parallel disciplines, each a response to a different issue as it emerged on the agenda. We have now talked about the benefits of a multisectoral, interdisciplinary approach for a decade since the Brundtland Commission elaborated the concept of sustainable development. It has now been almost three years since we talked in Rio about how we would walk down the road of sustainable development, guided by Agenda 21. It is now time to turn those words into action. It is now time for us to approach environmental issues in an integrated manner, in a way that meshes with the real world.

5. As we reached out to thoughtful, knowledgeable people in preparing to meet this challenge their message was clear and persistent. The world needs an authoritative voice for the environment. The world needs a stronger UNEP more now than ever before. The world needs a UNEP fully capable of raising consciousness about actions that negatively affect the environment: to identify responses that reflect and accommodate the complexities of the real world; to make the link between scientific knowledge and the mobilization of action among new and broader constituencies. The world needs a custodian of the environment - an organization with the power and the credibility to assert the needs of the environment wherever in the world they are threatened: east, west, north or south.

6. The world more than ever needs an organization that not only speaks strongly on behalf of the environment, but which goes well beyond speaking and is truly capable of catalysing action - action that brings about real and measurable improvements to the capacity of the natural resource base to support a decent quality of life, and provides the shelter, food, employment, health and the means for all the world's people to enjoy secure, productive and happy lives.

7. What we presented to you last Monday was a set of policies and programme proposals designed to realize those objectives. We focused on the conditions that would enable us to perform effectively: a firm institutional setting; a sound scientific base; a broader constituency; a capacity to catalyse action; a sound financial footing; a role in conflict prevention and resolution; and a fully integrated approach.

8. We identified the themes that reveal the commonality and connections among environmental problems and their relevance to the real world: the increasing pressure and unsustainable demands on natural resources; the prevalence of unsustainable production and consumption patterns; the impact of environmental change on human health and well-being; and the impact of globalization of the economy on the environment.

9. We proposed a programme that reflected the interconnectedness of issues and the complexity with which the real world operates. We recognized the necessity of applying a multiplicity of perspectives and disciplines to the environmental problems we seek to solve. We know that no one has all the answers, but that each of us has part of the answer. Fundamental to making an integrated programme work is the recognition that everyone has a responsibility. That was the concept agreed by the world's leaders, your Heads of State, in Rio.

10. Your preparatory committees responded to these proposals with cautious support. The articulation of the key environmental challenges went unquestioned. Specific initiatives responding to concerns about biosafety and toxic chemicals were endorsed. UNEP's particular expertise in catalysing government response to land-based sources of marine pollution, desertification and the special needs of small island developing States was recognized. The continuing need for a responsive, policy-oriented dissemination of information was accepted. And the strategy of strengthening UNEP's regional presence was firmly endorsed as the key to our future success.

11. And yet, much of the potential we envisioned in our proposals for change remains untapped. Last week your preparatory committee made real progress - but it has also conveyed some mixed messages, which I must confess have left me somewhat bewildered.

12. In every forum, you have affirmed environmental law as our unique contribution - one to be continued at all costs. Yet this major priority would be virtually dismantled as a consequence of the proposed budgetary allocation.

13. In every forum, you assert the transfer of environmentally sound technologies as a prerequisite for sustainable development. And yet the committee has proposed the downsizing of our most effective industry programme, which is building the capacity in developing countries for cleaner production.

14. In every forum, we speak of the importance of more accessible and regionally-based education and training, and yet the proposals before you would tie our hands by demanding that our scarce resources be directed to general academic programmes in well-established institutions, benefiting only a few.

15. In every forum, most recently in the Commission for Sustainable Development, you endorsed a significant role for UNEP in the field of trade and the environment. You recognized that, as global trade increases and with it the opportunity to generate new wealth, so increases the need to develop means by which to resolve the potential conflicts between the environment and the economy. The world, and I would venture to say, in particular, the developing world, has much to gain from a UNEP capable of contributing to the process of synthesizing economic and environmental imperatives. And here I want to be perfectly clear. We are speaking of protection of the environment, not environmental protectionism. And yet this most critical emerging field of study that demands our attention has been relegated the lowest of priority in the proposed allotment of resources.

16. And, finally, can a stronger UNEP evolve with only marginal resources? In 1991, the Governing Council approved an appropriation of $150 million for the 1992-93 biennium. In 1993, in this very room, you approved an appropriation of $120 to $130 million for the biennium 1994-95. Conscious of worldwide fiscal constraints, we prepared for 1996-97 a more modest but responsible programme of $105 million. We were able to propose something that was feasible and practical by applying a cost-effective, integrated, systemic approach. But now you have before you the committees' proposal for only $90 million for the next biennium, at a time when you are calling for a stronger UNEP.

17. It might appear that the integrated programme we proposed for the future was embraced. It would appear so on the surface. But a closer look at what transpired here last week reveals an unmistakable effort to protect the familiar sectoral programmes of the past.

18. Last week I said that it is the weight of your political decisions that will ensure the credibility of this organization as an authoritative voice for the environment. Today, as the preparatory work of the committees has been finalized, when the high-level ministerial segment of the Council prepares to undertake the policy decisions that will chart the future of this organization, that political weight is imperative.

19. This must not be a week of set speeches. You have an unprecedented opportunity - and indeed a responsibility - to shape the future of this organization. This organization must and will continue to speak for the environment. But who will speak for the organization? If not you, as Ministers of the Environment, then who?

20. It is critical that you review and assess policy and programme proposals through the lens of your unique and indispensable political perspectives. In doing so, you will need to determine whether or not the resources are adequate, whether or not our partnerships are clearly defined and our objectives focused and whether or not the mechanisms exist for your continuing political guidance.

21. But ultimately, your investment of time and energy this week will determine whether or not this organization is equipped to support you in fulfilling the expectations of your citizens for a healthy and secure environment.

22. As this century and this millennium draw to a close, as we mark the fiftieth anniversary of the founding of the United Nations, and as we speed into what certainly feels in many ways like a new, though still undefined, world order, there is ample cause for reflection. There is a desire, a need, to make sense of what we are doing, to make sure we are not repeating past mistakes, to make sure we are cleaning up the unfinished business of our twentieth century.

23. The need to feel that history is making progress is perhaps a particular preoccupation for those of us who operate under the belief that we humans can to some extent influence the course of events and make the world a better place. This is certainly the spirit in which the United Nations came into being fifty years ago. It is no less the spirit with which we must reaffirm and revitalize this organization.